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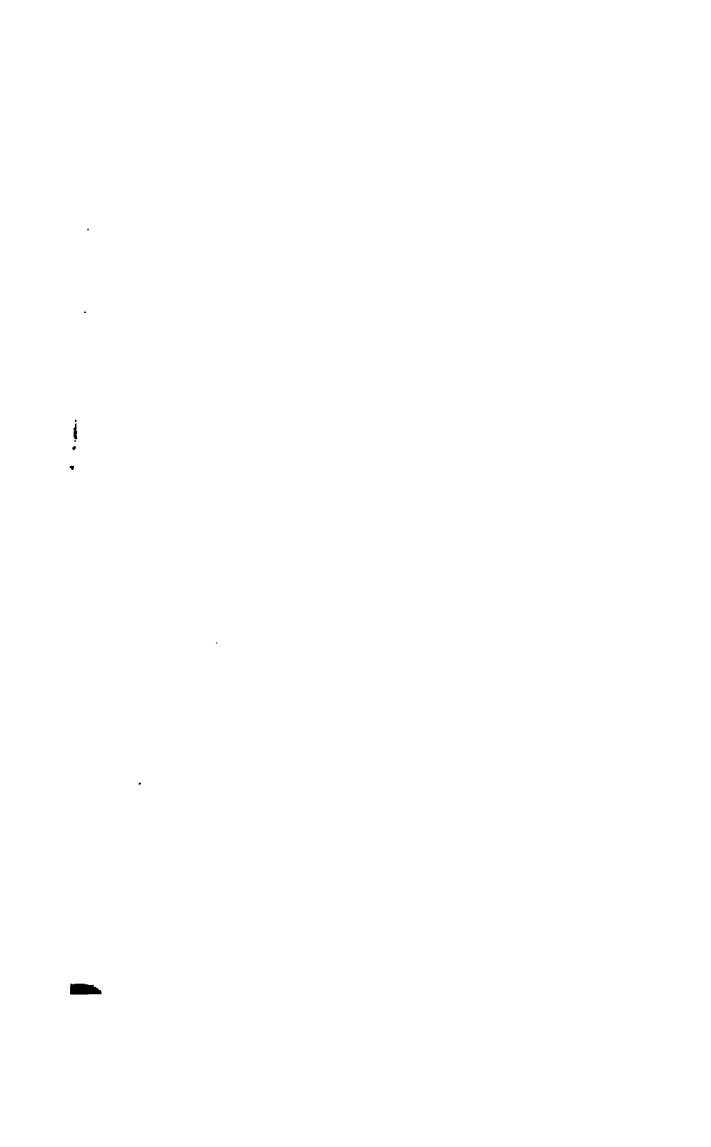
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THE CHOICE.

REV. EMILIUS BAYLEY.







THE CHOICE.



THE CHOICE.

FIVE LECTURES ON CONFIRMATION.

BY

EMILIUS BAYLEY, B.D.,

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"Choose you this day whom ye will serve."—*Joshua xxiv. 16.*

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PREFACE.

Erroneous views with reference to the meaning of the rite, and *shallow convictions* upon the great questions of sin and salvation, are very common with those who offer themselves as Candidates for Confirmation; and I take the opportunity, which the issue of a New Edition of the following Lectures affords me, of offering a few remarks upon the important subject with which they deal.

The mistake so often made is that of supposing that the person confirmed takes upon himself the responsibilities, or even, as some express it, the sins of his God-parents; as though the promises made in his name at Baptism were binding upon *them*; as though *they* were responsible for his

performance of such promises, until he relieved them of the burden, by taking such promises upon himself.

It cannot be too well remembered, that the promise "to renounce the devil and all his works, to believe in God, and to serve Him," on the strength of which Baptism is administered, is made by the person baptized (*"this infant must also faithfully for his part promise"*)—"Forasmuch as *this child hath promised*"), and *not* by the sponsors. They promise, it is true, but not for themselves; they promise in the infant's name, and as his representatives; but it is *his* promise, and becomes binding upon him the moment he comes of age to understand it, to feel its obligation, and to adopt it as his own. All that the sponsors are responsible for is, "that the infant be taught, so soon as he shall be able to learn, what a solemn vow, promise, and profession he hath made by them," that he learn the rudiments of the Christian faith, and that he "be brought up to lead a godly and a Christian life." This is the sponsor's duty, and it would be

well if they were more careful in attending to it. The neglect of children by parents is no excuse for the indifference of God-parents to the religious training of those for whom they have answered at the baptismal font; and an irreligious childhood, however much it may be the result of an irreligious home, entails a measure of guilt upon sponsors, if they make no attempt to counteract it. God-parents, therefore, have some responsibility resting upon them. They are in a degree responsible for seeing that the child is taught the nature and the obligation of the promise made, but they are *not* responsible for his observance of the promise. The burden of that duty rests upon him. It rests upon him, whether he be confirmed or not; he can never relieve himself of it. He may rebel against it, he may think to ignore it, but he must carry it with him to his dying day.

What then is the meaning of Confirmation? It is the public renewal and confirmation of the baptismal promise; the acknowledgment by the person confirmed that he is bound to believe and to do all

those things which his God-parents undertook for him at his Baptism ; the promise that by the grace of God he will evermore endeavour faithfully to observe such things as he has now by his own confession consented unto. Confirmation is thus the complement of Baptism. The Church of England holds on the baptized infant to Confirmation, and refuses to admit its members to full communion until they shall have made, or shall at all events be ready and desirous to make, public confession of their faith in Confirmation.

But a clear and accurate knowledge of the nature of the rite of Confirmation is not enough, unless there be also some conviction of sin, some real knowledge of and belief in the Saviour, some earnestness of purpose to lead a godly life. Shallow convictions upon these points are very common, but very dangerous. Young persons offer themselves as candidates because their parents or their employers wish it, or because they think it decent and proper to do so, or, it may be, because they are to a certain extent desirous to serve the Lord. But when we

come to examine them, and to ascertain, if possible, the character of their religious convictions, we too frequently find that they are shallow and unreal, even if they exist at all. I would urge upon all who are thinking of Confirmation, the necessity of earnestly praying for the help of God the Holy Ghost, that He may apply Divine truth with power to your conscience, that He may make you feel your guilt and danger as sinners, that He may enable you to believe in the Son of God. Too often the convictions and resolutions which belong to the season of Confirmation are as the early dew; they vanish before the first assault of the world's temptations; they exist but upon the surface of the soul, and having no root quickly fade away. You cannot too earnestly or too seriously reflect upon the step you propose to take. It may be, it often is, the turning point in the soul's salvation. But if lightly undertaken, if entered upon without real conviction, without earnest and constant prayer, it will confirm you only in the course of contented worldliness, and help to retain you in the broad way that leadeth to destruction. To

trifle with holy things ruins the soul. You need, then, to be true and earnest in your convictions. Pray that the Holy Spirit may produce those convictions. Pray that you may thoroughly and heartily give yourself to the Lord. Determine that, with God's help, you will be on the Lord's side ; that, convinced that one thing is needful, you may choose that good part which shall not be taken away from you.

E. B.

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I.

The Choice ; its Nature.

“ Choose you this day whom ye will serve.”

JOSH. xxiv. 15.

THESE words form part of the last address delivered by Joshua to the Israelites. The occasion was a very solemn one. The conquest of Canaan completed, and the land portioned out amongst the tribes, Joshua, feeling that his work was finished, and his end near (xxiii. 14), summoned the people together at Shechem ; and there, probably upon the very spot where the first covenant had been made with Abraham (Gen. xii. 6, 7), and where, upon the

entrance of the Israelites into Canaan, Joshua had himself called upon the people to give their solemn assent to the blessings and cursings of the law (Josh. viii. 30—35), he uttered his dying charge; and after recalling to their memories the countless mercies which they had received from the call of Abraham to that day, he exhorted them to yield themselves up unreservedly to the service of that Lord who had so richly blessed them. “Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve Him in sincerity, and in truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood (river), and in Egypt; and serve ye the Lord. And if it seem evil to you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood (river), or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me

and my house, we will serve the Lord.”
(Josh. xxiv. 14, 15.)

We are not to suppose that this was the first occasion upon which the people had been called upon to make their choice. They had made it many times before, sometimes for good, more frequently for evil. Now, however, upon this public occasion, when standing amid scenes hallowed by the recollections of centuries, and listening for the last time to their chieftain’s well-known voice, the alternative is once more placed before them, and they are invited to make a public profession of their allegiance to the true God.

It is so with us, my friends; through life we are continually making our election between good and evil. At times determining strongly for the one or for the other: at times nicely balancing their claims, seeking to effect a compromise between God and our own consciences, and

striving to possess the evil which we love, without altogether forfeiting the good we wish for. But this does not interfere with the fact, that there are certain great epochs in our lives, in which we are specially called upon to make our choice: when we feel that we can no longer live on the same wavering, undecided, half-hearted life as before: when a voice as from God seems to address us, and to say with an emphasis which we cannot resist, "Choose you this day whom ye will serve."

And such a season is that of Confirmation. For what is the part which we take in that holy rite? In confirmation we renew, in the presence of God and of the congregation, the solemn promise and vow that was made in our name at our baptism; we ratify and confirm the same in our own persons, and acknowledge ourselves bound to believe and to do all those

things which our godfathers and godmothers then undertook for us ; in a word, we publicly, in the sight of God and man, avow that we take the Lord Jehovah to be our God ; that we choose Him in preference to all besides, and that we earnestly desire to dedicate ourselves to Him and to His service for ever.

A most important act of choice is this ; and I wish you to feel, dear friends, and I wish to feel myself, the deep responsibility which belongs to this important question ; and I earnestly pray that God may so grant unto you His Spirit as that you may not only be led to choose the service of your God, but that your choice may be a lasting one, that it may be for time and for eternity.

It is this choice, then, under its several aspects, which I propose to make the subject of my addresses to you preparatory to confirmation.

I shall consider, first, the *nature* of the choice ; secondly, its *hindrances* ; thirdly, its *helps* ; and, lastly, its *blessedness*. To-day I shall dwell upon the first of these four aspects of the choice, and considering its *nature*, shall endeavour to answer the question, "What is it?"

Generally, we may say, that it is the "choosing whom we will serve." This implies three things : it implies (1) the necessity of choosing ; (2) the responsibility of choosing ; and (3) that there are but two alternatives,—that we must choose between God and sin.

I. *The necessity of choosing.* This is implied in our text : "Choose you this day whom ye will serve." It is absolutely necessary, constituted as we are, that we should make such choice. We all have hearts ; the heart is born to love, it lives only as it loves, and there must always be an object upon which the affections

of that heart are placed. Again: we all have wills; every moment of our waking being we are, whether consciously or not, exercising those wills; we cannot live without habitually performing acts of choice; and, therefore, from the very fact of our existence, we say that we are under an absolute necessity of choosing. It is one of those necessities which belongs to our very nature, that we should thus choose. We may sometimes wish that we had not to do so; we may wish, as some have wished, that we had never been born. But we have been born, we live,—and as living, rational creatures, choice, constant ceaseless choice, must be made.

II. *The responsibility of choosing.* This is implied in the fact, that God commands us to choose. He says to us, by the mouth of His servant, “Choose you this day whom ye will serve.” It is further proved by the declaration of God, that He

will bring us into judgment if we do choose aright. "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment." (Eccl. xi. 9.) "God will bring thee into judgment." Now judgment implies responsibility. There can be no just judgment if there be not responsibility. In our courts of criminal justice, a man accused of the heaviest crimes, is acquitted, if the plea of insanity prevails. He may be imprisoned as a lunatic, as a dangerous member of society; but he is not condemned, he is not judged as a criminal; for judgment implies responsibility. If God, therefore, declares that He will bring us into judgment, if we do not make the choice which He commands, it is plain that we are responsible for that

choice. It is one of the most dangerous fallacies which Satan, the father of lies, addresses to men, when he tries to persuade them that they are not responsible for their actions. He says often to the young man, "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, God will *not* bring thee into judgment." He argues, that if God has implanted certain appetites and passions in our nature, it cannot be reasonable that He should condemn us for gratifying them : that if God has given to us a taste and a liking for certain pleasures and amusements, it cannot be supposed that He wishes us to live a life of strictness and of gloom, to be the followers of a religion which bids us renounce the world, and practise daily self-denial.

"Hath God, indeed, given appetites to man,
And stored the earth so plenteously with means
To gratify the hunger of his wish,
And doth He reprobate, and will He damn
The use of His own bounty?"

Such is Satan's argument, and many there are with hearts well disposed to live on terms of friendship with sin, whom it helps to lull to sleep.

Three great realities, however, yet live on. As long as there is a *God*, a *Law*, and a *Conscience*, man's responsibility must continue.

There is a *God*, who is the supreme Ruler and Governor of all men. He has given to man a *Law*; He has not enshrined Himself in impenetrable secrecy, but has proclaimed His will to man, to be the rule of life and of judgment. *Conscience* also yet survives: that faculty in each of you, by which you take cognizance of the righteousness, truth, and justice of the law, and acknowledge yourself bound to render obedience to Him who is your Ruler, and who will be your Judge. Satan tries to undermine these great truths. He persuades some, indeed, that there is no

God. "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God." Of course, if there be no God, man may live on as he likes, and fear nothing. More frequently, Satan tries to undermine the authority of the Word of God; either persuading us that it is too difficult and too obscure to be understood, or endeavouring to destroy its Divine authority, and thus to weaken the hold which it has upon our consciences. Or again, he seeks to deaden and blunt the conscience, and so to render man utterly callous to the claims of the Lawgiver and the authority of the law. But believing, as we must do, in the existence of a God, in the authority of a law, and in the reality of our own conscience, we must feel, if we deal honestly with ourselves, that we are responsible for the choice which we make in the great question of religion.

III. *There are but two alternatives,—we*

must make our choice between God and sin. A very simple consideration proves this. If you choose not the Lord, you reject Him, —“He that is not with me is against me.” But to reject the Lord, is plainly a deadly sin. The only way of avoiding this difficulty is, by attempting a compromise, and by endeavouring to render service partly to the Lord, and partly to sin. Need I remind you, that to attempt this, is to attempt an impossibility? “No man can serve two masters,” whose principles are entirely opposed to each other, and who both demand the whole heart. “You cannot,” however much you may attempt to do it, “you cannot serve God and mammon.” Your choice, then, lies between God and sin.

But in what way, you may ask, does sin present itself to us, and claim our choice? It may not come, and probably there are many to whom it does not come, in those

open forms, and in that unblushing manner in which it addresses itself to some. But still it does come, and claims our heart's affections. In what way does it come? The two great avenues by which sin approaches us are, *the flesh* and *the world*. The flesh, with its corrupt affections, its sinful desires, its unhallowed passions, the world, with its gaiety, its pride, its folly, its vanity, its ambition, are the two great channels by which sin endeavours to enter, and to win the heart of man; whilst over all the wondrous mechanism within him and around him, Satan, the god of this world presides, and endeavours by every means which his subtlety and malice can devise, to withdraw the soul from its allegiance to God. And, oh! dear friends, well does that arch-deceiver know to hide the poison and the sting which lie concealed beneath the forbidden pleasure; well does

he know to persuade the unwary that the show, and the glitter, and the ornament, are all real, and true, and lasting ; well does he know to lead the unstable on from step to step, until at length, with blinded understanding, and with blunted conscience, he yields himself a ready and a willing slave to the prince of darkness !

Will *you*, then, choose sin ? Will *you* devote your lives to the service of the world, to the service of the flesh, to the service of the devil ? Is there no other alternative, but that you enter upon this miserable course, which brings with it, as it assuredly does, wretchedness in this life, and unutterable woe in the life to come ? Yes, my dear friends, there is another alternative. The Lord Jehovah offers Himself to you, and bids you choose Him. He offered Himself to the Israelites, under a form most attractive and most inviting, as "The Lord God, mer-

ciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty." (Exod. xxxiv. 6, 7.) But He offers Himself to us under a far more attractive form, and in a manner which far more powerfully addresses itself to all the sensibilities of our nature, and to all wants of our hearts; He offers Himself to us in the person of Jesus. He comes down in the person of His dear Son, and stands at the door of our rebellious hearts, and knocks for admittance. He comes in the person of Jesus, and presents Himself as a God of mercy, of tenderness, of compassion; as a God of justice, no doubt, but, in Jesus, as a God of forgiving love. He stands waiting to be gracious, He bids us open the door of our hearts to Him, He promises us every blessing which the soul

can need,—the bread of life to satisfy our hunger, and the water of life to quench our thirst. It is this Jesus who comes and presents Himself at the door of the sinner's heart, and bids that sinner choose *Him*. And can you doubt, dear friends, if ever you have doubted before, whom you will choose? "Choose you this day whom ye will serve."

But let me add, with reference to this choice, that there are certain elements in it, which must be steadily borne in mind, if we would well understand its nature. It must be (1) free, (2) decided, and (3) lasting.

(1) *It must be a FREE choice.* This is evidently implied in our text. "Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve Him . . . And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve." Not that we are to gather from this, that the Israelites were at liberty to

choose whom they pleased, without any responsibility, and that they might with impunity have chosen the false gods of the heathen around them; but that what the Lord wanted was a free and a willing choice. And so with you. He places before you the evidence in favour of what is true and right; He shows you its advantages; He shows you the obligation you are under to decide in its favour; but He desires that there should be a free decision,—a choosing God, because you see Him to be supremely good, and a rendering of service to Him gladly, and with a willing mind.

(2) *The choice must be a DECIDED choice.* Joshua says, in the fourteenth verse,—“Fear the Lord and serve Him *in sincerity and in truth.*” Now, it would appear from chapter xxiii. verse 8 of this book, that the Israelites of that day were not an openly idolatrous people, but

were comparatively righteous ; and therefore the exhortation,—“ Put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt, and serve the Lord,” must be regarded as a solemn injunction, that they should keep themselves from everything which might lead them into the practice of their old idolatry, and separate themselves decidedly from whatsoever bore the mark of that sin to which they were so prone. In the same way I would say to you, dear friends, let your choice of God be decided, unconditional, uncompromising. You will find that there are persons who plead in favour of much which, as I read it, the Word of God practically condemns. You will find not a few who are advocates of the ball-room, the race-course, the theatre, and other places of a similar kind. I would earnestly and affectionately entreat you to examine into the teaching of the Word of God



upon the subject of conformity to the world, and then to ask your own consciences, whether such amusements and such scenes are not “of” that “*world*” which Christians are bidden to renounce? If *they* do not form part of the pomps and vanities of the world, what do? Take heed, then, that your choice of the Lord be a decided choice. You will find it by far the easiest course to take. The waverer, the man who hesitates, the man who conforms to the world in some things, and does not make a solemn and decided stand, finds his path far more difficult, and his way more perplexing, and the line and course of his conduct far more entangled, than he who decidedly and firmly turns his back upon whatsoever he believes to be contrary to the spirit of the Gospel. When once you have taken a decided course, when you have parted from the world, you may find, no doubt, that it

opposes and scoffs at you, that it speaks of you as over-strict, as righteous over-much, as setting up your own judgment against that of those who are your superiors, as condemning by your practice the practice of many persons of great uprightness. No matter, dear friends ; we are to obey God rather than man, and I believe, whether you consult the glory of God, or whether you consult your own happiness, you will find that it is far easier, and far better, to make at once a decided stand, and to be uncompromising in your renunciation of the world and of the flesh, and in your adhesion to the service of your Lord.

(3) *The choice must be LASTING.* And here comes in the important truth, that we choose God because He hath first chosen us. You could not make a choice, and say within yourself, "This choice shall be an abiding choice," unless you

believed that grace had first inclined your heart to make the choice, and that that grace would continue with you, and confirm it to the end. You may, and you must, if your choice be good and true, determine not only for the present, but also for the future, and say, "I heartily give myself to the Lord for all time, and for all eternity." There must be no reservation in your mind upon this point; but then you must lean upon the arm of covenant promise, and you must look to the grace which alone can keep you, if you would have this choice really ratified and confirmed of God, so as to be abiding and eternal.

Such, dear friends, is the nature of the choice to which our text invites you. By the very constitution of our natures, there is a necessity for making a choice. We are responsible for its character; and the only alternative is between God and sin.

If freely, decidedly, and abidingly, choose the Lord Jehovah, and His service, you make the choice which God approves and which God will bless.

(1) *Some of you, I trust, have made this choice.* Dear Christian friends, be deeply thankful that you have been led so to choose; but be humble, be prayerful. "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall." Do not suppose that, having once made up your minds, the conflict is over. Rather should we say, that when the choice is once made, the conflict really begins, and that fearful struggle commences between the spirit and the flesh, which ends only with life.

Let this season, therefore, be one of much earnest prayer on your part; that you may be so strengthened and confirmed in your choice, and that you may be enabled, in that conflict which awaits you, and in those trials and difficulties through

which you have to pass, to demean yourselves as true soldiers of the cross. Let your earnest and constant prayer be, that the Lord would "strengthen you with might, by His Spirit in the inner man."

(2) *Some of you have not yet made this choice*,—is not this the case?—*but you desire to make it*. Let me give you one word of advice. Beware of delay. "Choose you *this day* whom ye will serve." Remember that your position, though hopeful, is critical and dangerous: you may be saved; but you may be lost! Let me counsel you, then, to take home with you, to apply to your hearts and to your consciences the truth which our text sets before us, "Choose you this day whom ye will serve;" and do not let your hearts rest,—yea, do not let God rest, until He has so given to you the mighty influence of His Spirit, that you have decided to take the Lord to be your God; until

you can say, in all sincerity and truth, though at the same time in deep humility, "I have chosen the Lord to be my portion;" until you can join in the language of God's servant in olden time:—"As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

II.

The Choice: its Hindrances.

“And Joshua said unto the people, Ye cannot serve the Lord.”—JOSH. xxiv. 19.

It is a difficult thing to be a Christian. It is difficult to become such in the first place, and it is difficult to continue such afterwards.

The word of God teaches this truth. “Strive (literally agonize) to enter in at the strait gate.” (Luke xiii. 24.) “Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life.” (Matt. vii. 14.) “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.” (Luke ix. 23.) These and a

host of other passages which describe the Christian life as a "warfare," a "fight," a "wrestling," all prove that to be really religious is no easy matter, and that as in olden time so now, "The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force." (Matt. xi. 12.)

The reception which religion has met with in the world confirms it. How small has been the number of the truly pious living at any one period upon the earth. Eight persons only maintained their integrity in the time of the flood: not ten righteous were found within the cities of the plain: three only refused to bow down before the image of gold set up by the heathen monarch in the plains of Dura. "Fear not, *little flock*," is the Saviour's language to His disciples; whilst He expressly declares concerning "the gate" which leads to life, that "few there be that find it." (Matt. vii. 14.) Why is this?

Why has it happened that in all periods of the world's history true religion has been rejected by the many and embraced only by the few, unless it be that there is much in it which opposes and contradicts the natural likings of the human heart, and consequently much difficulty in the practice of it?

The Christian's own experience proves it. Who that has ever made an honest effort to give up sin and serve the Lord; who that has ever striven to break loose from a world which lieth in wickedness, and to take the Word of God as his simple rule of life; who that has ever passed through the strait gate of conversion, and endeavoured to walk along the narrow pathway of holiness, has not found from his own deep and often bitter experience, that it is difficult to begin, difficult to continue the Christian life. Joshua seems to have felt this upon the occasion to

which the text refers. Called upon to choose whom they would serve, the Israelites had readily answered, "God forbid that we should forsake the Lord, and serve other gods" (Josh. xxiv. 16); indignantly rejecting the supposition that it was possible for them to forsake One who had rescued them from the bondage of Egypt and given them such triumphant entrance into the land of promise. To this emphatic announcement of their determination, Joshua replies, "Ye cannot serve the Lord." Strange words were these, contradicting, as it would seem, the exhortation which had just been uttered. "Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve Him," is very different from what immediately follows, "Ye cannot serve the Lord." What, then, is the meaning of these latter words?

It cannot for a moment be supposed that Joshua intended to deter the people

from the service of their God ; on the contrary, his obvious design was to enlist them sincerely and steadfastly in it ; but his knowledge of the weakness and corruption of human nature prompted him to do this in a manner which savoured of discouragement. Finding them animated by a glowing zeal, forward and abundant in their professions, and unconsciously prone to trust in their own strength, he wished to show them that it was no such easy matter as they supposed to give themselves up entirely to the Lord ; that the service to which they were so ready to devote themselves was the service of an holy and sin-avenging God, of One who would visit apostacy with fearful punishment ; and that it behoved them to consider well the difficulties of the task they were undertaking, as well as their own sufficiency, or rather insufficiency, for the performance of it, lest, like the man who

intended to build a tower, but who neglected to count the cost of it before he commenced his work, they too should expose themselves to the humiliating charge, "This man began to build, but was not able to finish." (Luke xiv. 28—30.) It was with the view, therefore, of placing the service of God in its true light, as one of no little difficulty, that Joshua replied as in the text, "Ye cannot serve the Lord ;" as though he had said, "*ye cannot*" in the state of heart in which you are at present ; *ye will not be able* from merely human resolutions, and apart from the help of the grace of God, to carry out your present purpose, and yield a decided and lasting service to the Lord.

I am persuaded, dear friends, that this is the right course to take when we are pressing upon others the claims of vital religion ; for although we may seem to further those claims by making religion

appear easier than it is, we shall not really do so. On the contrary, we shall run the danger of leading some persons to regard themselves as real Christians who have never undergone a change of heart, and of encouraging a feeling of despondency in others, who, meeting with unexpected difficulties in their way, are tempted either to relax their efforts, or altogether to abandon them.

Having therefore in the first lecture described *the nature* of that choice which we are all called upon to make, I shall now examine some of *the hindrances* which stand in the way of our making such choice,—some of those difficulties which, if we would truly serve the Lord, must be encountered and overcome.

I. *The first and chief of all our hindrances is to be found in our own hearts.* It is here that the real difficulty lies; it is here that the real battle has to be fought.

If our hearts were naturally holy, truthful, and believing, there could not be a moment's hesitation as to whom we should serve ; our readiness to choose the service of the Lord would only be equalled by the delight which we took in it when chosen, and the firmness of our determination to continue in it for ever. But this we know is not the case : our natures are fallen : our hearts are corrupt : and it is whilst we are in this state that the great question of the *choice* is presented to us.

(1) In the first place, *the heart is sinful and unholy*. It has no natural liking for holiness : on the contrary, it views it with aversion. The poison of sin has so thoroughly taken possession of it, that it loves what it ought to hate, and hates what it ought to love. It is this wrong state of heart, which lies at the foundation of man's unbelief : "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men *loved*

darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil *hateth* the light, neither cometh to the light lest his deeds should be reprov'd." (John iii. 19, 20.) When God therefore presents Himself to the sinner as holy, just, and true, and demands the devoted and loving service of the heart, that heart, if left to itself, rejects the invitation, and refuses to make the choice. What, for example, is the aversion which you feel to secret prayer, the diligent study of the Bible, the society of holy men, and, in fact, to whatever partakes most of the nature of spiritual religion, but a proof that your heart naturally takes no pleasure in the ways of godliness,—that it likes not to conform to the holy will of God?

(2) Secondly, *the heart is both deceived and deceitful.*

"A *deceived* heart has turned him aside."

(Isaiah xliv. 20.) "The heart is *deceitful* above all things." (Jer. xvii. 9.)

The natural heart is for ever taking a false view of things. It regards *sin* not as the Word of God describes it, but as something desirable, and often comparatively harmless : it looks upon *holiness* as a thing of gloom and moroseness,—a necessary acquirement, perhaps, but one which is by no means to be identified with true happiness : it paints *God* either as an—"austere" and "hard" Master, "reaping where He has not sown, and gathering where He has not strawed ;" making requirements of man which He has not given him the power to fulfil, and therefore not able justly to punish him for failure in fulfilling them : or else as a smiling and indulgent Father, who regards with indifference the violation of His precepts, and readily passes over the frailties of His children : whilst it never regards Him as a

God at once of justice and of love, a just God and a Saviour: and, lastly, it looks upon the world,—at all events for the young,—as a gay, bright, hopeful object, well able by its pleasures and amusements, its gaiety and its mirth, to satisfy the wants of the soul: it sees no dark side of the picture, no great realities which have to be met, no solemn future which has to be provided for. Everything is viewed through a false medium, and when men of the world, moved to serious thought, and somewhat questioning their position, fall back upon these very hearts, and consult them concerning the choice which they shall make, they receive from them a false and ruinous reply, and thus they verify in their own experience the saying of the wise man, that “he that trusteth in his own heart is a fool.” (Proverbs xxviii. 26.)

(3) Thirdly, *the heart is unbelieving.*

“Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief.” (Heb. iii. 12.)

In religion we have to do almost exclusively with the unseen : God is unseen ; heaven is unseen ; hell is unseen : we receive the truths concerning these things by faith. In the choice therefore of which I am speaking, we are called to act by faith : surrounded by objects which we see and possess, and which afford us a present gratification, we are bidden to withdraw our hearts from these objects, and fix them upon what is unseen and future ; and we are to do this upon the testimony of an invisible God.

In parting with the one class of objects, and transferring our affections to another, we give up something, the enjoyable character of which we have in some sort experienced, for that which we are indeed assured will make us happy, but of which

we have as yet had no experience : we take our step almost in the dark, seeing nothing at the time, but believing the promise of God, that we shall find a firm foundation beneath our feet. The choice then is a choice of faith. "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." (John xx. 29.) But how shall an unbelieving heart make such a choice? At all events, this principle of unbelief must prove a great hindrance in our way. The statements of God's Word concerning the uncompromising nature, and the absolute necessity of this choice, are not believed ; the threatenings pronounced against a divided, half-hearted service are not believed ; the warnings concerning judgment and eternal misery, on the one hand, the promises to the faithful servant of present peace and blessedness, and of future glory, on the other, are not believed : man gives credit to his fellow-man : he believes the word

of a creature ; he will not believe the Word of the Creator, the True, the Holy, the infinitely-blessed God.

You find thus in the *sinfulness*, the *deceitfulness*, and the *unbelief* of your own hearts, the main hindrance to your entrance upon a life of decided devotedness to God. Other hindrances there are, but they all have their origin there. If the heart were right, other difficulties would soon vanish : it is in the heart that the seat of the evil exists ; the essential cause of every wrong choice through life is there.

And what does this teach us, but that a complete change, a thorough conversion of heart is necessary, if you would serve God aright ? As long as the very nature of the heart is sinful, deceitful, unbelieving, your choice must be a perverted one ; the nature of the heart must determine the choice of the heart. If, therefore, you

feel, as I trust you do feel, that it rests with you to choose whom you will serve, and that if you would be saved, you must choose the Lord: be assured also that no half measures will avail; that you are dealing with a heart corrupt in the very core of its being, and that you must seek at God's hands that mighty change which the Holy Ghost alone can work. Anything short of this will only be the putting of the new patch to the old garment. If the fruit is to be good, you must make the tree good. "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh." (Ezek. xxxvi. 26.) This is the Lord's free promise: let your earnest, ceaseless prayer be, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." (Psalm li. 10.)

II. *Another class of hindrances to the*

commencement of a truly religious life, arises from the corruption of the world in which we live. If the heart within proves our chief hindrance, its obstructing power is very much increased by the world, the moral world in which we move, the influences of which are for ever acting upon us, and which is itself deeply pervaded by the spirit of irreligion. The description of it in the New Testament is that of a world "lying in wickedness" (1 John v. 19); its friendship is declared to be "enmity with God" (James iv. 4); and its main features are described as being "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 John ii. 16). It is this world, with a moral atmosphere the same now as in apostolic times, which surrounds us; in it we live, and in it, and in spite of it, we have to make our choice.

See now how it operates against us, and how great a hindrance it often proves.

(1) *The love of the world* has been the ruin of many. Herod, though he heard John gladly, and did many things, could not tear himself from the pleasures and sins which he loved. The young Ruler in the Gospels was evidently earnest and sincere in the inquiry which he addressed to Christ, but his heart clave to this world's goods : he loved his money better than his God, and he went away sorrowful, having great possessions. Demas, an apostle's friend and companion, at length forsook him, "having loved this present world."

And does not this self-same love keep many back now from serving the Lord? Are *you* free from its influence? Do you love its amusements and its gaieties? Do you love its admiration and its flattery, its honours and its wealth? Do you love the luxury, the indolence, the self-indulgence and self-gratification which it approves? Do you love, it may be, habits

and practices which are distinctly sinful, though meeting with no condemnation from it? If so, you feel very unwilling to break off from objects which so powerfully attract you, and hence your hesitation, if not your refusal, to serve the Lord.

(2) *The fear of the world* is another form of hindrance which operates upon some minds. "Among the chief rulers," in the time of Christ, we are told that "many believed on Him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue." (John xii. 42.) You do, most undoubtedly, expose yourself to the observation and ridicule, if not to the open opposition of the worldly, when you separate yourselves from them, and join yourselves to the people of God; and the fear of this can hardly fail to influence you. There *may* be instances where persons are so surrounded by an atmosphere of piety,

as that this hostility of the world is but little provoked, -and therefore but little felt; but this is the exception, not the rule, and not a few have to number the fear of the world, amongst the hindrances which they have to encounter.

(3) *The cares of the world* are often pleaded as an excuse for not serving the Lord; and certainly "the cares," no less than "the riches and pleasures" of this life, are represented in the parable as choking the good seed of the kingdom. Nor is it difficult to see how much the ceaseless anxiety about temporal things, and the busy restless spirit which accompanies it, must stand in the way of that devout and sustained attention to the claims of religion, which must be given, if we are ever heartily to embrace it.

Such hindrances, then, does the world offer. There is one principle, and but one, which can surmount them; that principle

is *faith*. "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." (1 John v. 4.) In yourselves you are utterly powerless in contending with this great adversary ; but Jesus has said, "Be of good cheer ; I have overcome the world." (John xvi. 33.) Seek for a living faith in Him, and a new power shall be given you, which shall enable you to resist the world's hostility, and, surmounting its opposition, to choose Christ as your Saviour and your God.

Other hindrances there are which it might be well to notice : those mental difficulties, for example, which perplex the minds of some sincere inquirers, and make them long hesitate, fearful lest they should choose amiss, and stake their all upon a lie ; or, again, those hindrances which arise from the evil example of others, —of a parent, for instance, or an elder brother or sister, who, having made no

definite choice themselves, render it very difficult for a child, or younger relative, to take a more decided course. A very solemn consideration is this for those parents who wish their children to be religious, but who are hindering, instead of helping them forward, by their own indecision. I believe, however, that the chief hindrances are those upon which I have dwelt; all others have their source either in the corruption of the heart, or in the corruption of the world, or in both combined.

In conclusion, then, you must take it for granted, that in every effort to serve the Lord you will meet with hindrances. *Do not undervalue them.* If they exist, and assuredly they do exist, you can gain nothing by refusing to recognize them. "You cannot serve the Lord" with that ease, perhaps, with which you may once have thought to do so; unexpected difficul-

ties present themselves ; look them fairly in the face ; you can never do wrong by knowing the truth ; endeavour in religion to see things as they really are ; give their full value to the difficulties which meet you, and count the cost.

But be not discouraged. The hindrances which stand in your way have more or less stood in the way of every saint of God. They have been met and overcome. How? "Ye cannot serve the Lord" in your own strength. There is a strength, however, in which you can do so, a power which may be yours if you will seek it. Let the gate be ever so strait, the choice ever so difficult, helps are within your reach which shall more than match all your hindrances: "The things which are impossible with men are possible with God." (Luke xviii. 27.) But this is the subject of my next lecture.

III.

The Choice: its Help.

*"But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them,
With men this is impossible; but with God
all things are possible."* (MATT XIX. 26.)

IN these words we have our Lord's solution of the question proposed originally by the apostles, but asked many times since, "Who then can be saved?" The young ruler had listened in dismay to the searching test applied to him by Christ, "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow Me." (Matt. xix. 21.) He was "very sorrow-

ful," but his sorrow led to no repentance, no change of mind: "he went away," a mournful example of the mighty hold which "the world" has upon the affections of the unrenewed heart, and of the hindrances which it offers to the free and unreserved choice of the service of the Saviour. Our Lord's comment upon the conduct of the Ruler enforces this view of the case. "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, that a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven" (xix. 23); a statement which drew forth the inquiry to which our text is a reply: "When His disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved? But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible" (xix. 25, 26). The apostles had not confined their question to the single case of the rich; they

had asked generally, "Who (*i.e.*, what man) can be saved?" The answer was as general, "With men this is impossible:" plainly teaching that such is the condition of man by nature, so great the difficulties, so many the hindrances in the way of his salvation, as that the attainment of salvation by his own power is an impossibility: "but," our Lord adds, "with God all things are possible."

The "impossible" is here affirmed to be "possible," by One who could not be mistaken, by One who knew full well the hindrances in man's way, but who also knew the helps which are within his reach.

It is to these that I wish now to draw your attention.

The various *helps* to salvation may be regarded as either *external* or *internal*, according to the position which they occupy with reference to that master faculty of the mind, which has to be influenced and

swayed,—the human will. We will take them in this order.

I. EXTERNAL HELPS.

We live in a world in which we are continually exposed to temptation; the visible, tangible framework which surrounds us exercises over us an influence which is adverse to religion; we are entangled, as it were, in a net, the meshes of which are ever and anon closing round us, as often as we entertain a wish, or make an effort to be free.

This is not, however, the invariable rule. If we look for them, we shall find certain agencies in existence, which are all on the side of religion, and which, if we will but make use of them, and allow them to have their due influence with us, will assuredly incline our choice in the right direction. What are they?

(1) THE BIBLE.

In the Bible we have God's standing

protest against sin, God's public authoritative declaration in favour of virtue and of truth. The will of God is therein made known to us ; the wiles of Satan, the hollowness of the world, and the errors of the human heart are exposed ; warnings the most awful are pronounced against the irreligious, promises the most free and blessed are made to all who truly seek the Lord. "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul : the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart : the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes." (Ps. xix. 7, 8.) In the midst of an adverse world there exists therefore a book, which contains a strict rule of right, and proves an infallible guide to those who follow its directions.

Use this blessed book with earnest prayer for Divine teaching, and you will find it one of the mightiest helps to you

in making your choice for God. Let its solemn denunciations against sin, and its threatenings of eternal vengeance, have their full weight upon your conscience, and they shall deter you from a life of disobedience : let its words of mercy and encouragement reach your heart, and they shall win you to the side of purity and love. Let your Bible be your friend, your companion, your guide through life, and in the great question of your service, you shall never have to mourn over a perverted and destructive choice.

(2) THE CHAMBER OF PRAYER.

It was the advice given by David to those who had joined in the rebellion of Absalom, that they should "commune with their own hearts, and in their chamber, and be still." (Psalm iv. 4 ; P. B. V.) The Psalmist knew how unlikely it was that they should see their error and return to their allegiance, as long as they formed

part of the noisy, excited crowd of daring rebels : the retirement of the closet might lead them to reflect, and thus bring about a better state of mind. Let not this lesson be thrown away upon you.

The silent chamber stands out in marked contrast with the noisy bustle of a restless, anxious, busy world. Frequent that chamber often. Learn there to consider your ways : learn there to think upon God and your own soul : learn there to pray. Without prayer, depend upon it you cannot choose aright : with it, if it be hearty, humble, believing prayer, you will not fail to make the blessed choice.

(3) THE HOUSE OF GOD.

Attendance upon the public worship of God is one of our plainest duties. God is honoured by the united prayers and praises which are offered to Him, and by the public reading and preaching of His written Word ; whilst the sincere worshipper

derives a blessing. The solemnity which belongs to such act of worship, the effort to join in the devotions of the congregation, the truths which are proclaimed, and pressed home upon the conscience, all tend to influence the heart and incline the choice. How many there are, who date their first serious impressions, their first earnest resolve to serve the Lord, from their attendance upon the house of God.

(4) THE SABBATH.

"Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath day," is a law "made for man," and designed for his eternal good. One day in seven set apart for the more sustained consideration of Divine truth, and the more uninterrupted worship of God, cannot fail, if rightly observed, to produce a good result. Very solemn and very important are these sacred pauses in our course; they almost force upon us the claims of religion; the very stillness of the day has a

voice in it as from God. The Sabbath proves itself a mighty help to those who are living the Christian life, but it is, moreover, a great help in leading persons at the outset to decide for God.

(5) INFLUENCE.

By this I mean, of course, the good influence which the society, the advice, the very character of the truly pious, exert upon others. It is, doubtless, most important for you to shun the company of the ungodly; it is also most necessary that you should seek as your companions and your friends those persons who fear God, that the silent but ceaseless influence which they exercise over you, may be for good. And this brings me to the last of those external helps to which I shall allude, viz. :—

(6) HABIT.

I have mentioned this last not as being the least important, but as being a prin-

ciple which is applicable to all that has been before stated. We are all the creatures of habit, and I am persuaded that nothing of an external kind tends so much to secure a right choice in life as the early formation of good habits. Even those habits which may be, and often are, formed apart from the influence of religion,—as for example those of diligence, kindness, the surrender of our own wills, self-denial, benevolence, and such-like,—produce a character which shall bend much more readily to religion when its claims are brought before it, than would have been the case had such habits never been cultivated. It is, however, a religious habit which I wish specially to press upon you. Cultivate the habit of regularly reading and reflecting upon a portion of the Bible every night and morning : cultivate the habit of spending some portion of time, at least twice a day, in secret prayer ; let nothing keep

you from performing these two duties, make them a matter of conscience, regard them as your daily bread. Again, cultivate the habit of attending the house of God ; let nothing but necessity cause you to be absent from public worship on the Lord's day. Cultivate the habit of keeping the Sabbath holy : avoid all worldly and trivial conversation, all secular business, all occupations which do not bear upon them the stamp of sacredness ; and make an effort to devote the day to the worship of God, the consideration of religion, and the care of the soul. Lastly, cultivate the habit of holding free, unrestrained intercourse with pious persons upon the great questions of salvation : let the beneficial influence which others may exert over you have its full effect ; expect good from others, be willing to receive it ; but endeavour to place yourself habitually where you may have a right

to expect it. Be careful, then, to make diligent use of the various helps which I have named, and your choice will be well nigh made, at all events you will not be far from the kingdom of heaven.

Still, however, you may feel that what has been mentioned does not touch the centre of your being: that these helps, blessed and valuable as they are, are in a sense only external, and that something more is needed if the seat of the evil is to be reached, if the will is to be swayed, if you are indeed freely and for ever to choose the Lord; and you may fairly ask whether no other means exist by which you may be aided in making the necessary choice. I proceed then to consider,—

II. THE INTERNAL HELPS upon which we may rely.

Our text teaches us two things. It teaches,—(1) That with men salvation is impossible: that so great are the hin-

drances and difficulties in their way, that the choice of God, and the attainment of salvation are, so far as their own power is concerned, impossibilities. (2) That the possibility which rests not with man belongs to God; with Him all things, and of course the giving of salvation, are possible.

And this suggests the two points which I wish to place before you.

(1) *The first great inward help is to be convinced of your own helplessness.*

Extremes often meet. In religion, the moment you despair of yourselves, you may begin to hope: poverty, conscious poverty, is the first step to spiritual wealth: it is the first requisite for entering the kingdom, as set forth by our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. v. 3.) It was the charge brought against the Laodiceans, that they

thought themselves "rich and increased with goods, having need of nothing ; and knew not that they were wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Revelation iii. 17) ; and the doctrine of forgiveness, as taught in the parable of the two debtors, is that "when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both." (Luke vii. 42.)

The starting point, then, of all real progress is a state of felt and acknowledged helplessness, the renunciation of all self-dependence, the conviction that sin has so marred, and ruined, and perverted our nature, has so poisoned the very centre of our being, as that we are nothing, have nothing, and can do nothing. We may ask, indeed, with the Apostles, "Who then can be saved?" Our answer must be "with men," with me certainly, "this is impossible."

Dear friends, pray for a profound con-

viction of your own helplessness in this matter. It is the work of the Spirit of God to produce that conviction ; your own natural powers may show you that the choice of God ought to be made, and that many hindrances exist to your making it ; by your own powers alone you may use, in some sort, those external helps which I have spoken of ; but now, when you have reached sin's stronghold, and are dealing with a depraved heart, and a corrupt will, you must have the aid of a higher power,—aye, even to learn truly your need of that power, to be effectually convinced of your own helplessness. But you will no sooner have arrived at this conviction, than you will find that you possess in it a most powerful agent, a mighty inward help towards the beginning of a life of true service, for you will have seen the fallacy of relying upon a sinful and deceitful heart, and will be ready to welcome the

assistance by which alone you can succeed.

(2) *The second great inward help is God.*

Thus broadly stated you may hardly see the force of the truth. Let us break it up into its several parts.

God has revealed Himself as willing to save all men. "For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy ii. 4.) "The Lord is . . . long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." (2 Pet. iii. 9.) I know that we are here on the edge of an abyss of mystery; but while holding fast by Scripture we are on safe ground. We have thus in the Bible an express assurance of God's willingness to save all men. Let any one who is earnestly desirous of serving the Lord, weigh

this truth well. Let him look at God, not as an austere, hard Master, but as a God of love, a God willing to save. Let him suffer God to approach him in this character, and he will find in this view of God, as one willing His salvation, a mighty inward help to the choice of that God, as his God.

But, further, God has given practical and convincing proof of His willingness to save, and has provided a wonderful method for carrying such willingness into effect, by giving His own Son to die in the stead of sinners, and thus to accomplish the world's atonement. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved." (John iii. 16, 17.) Let the earnest seeker after God lay this truth of a

crucified Saviour to heart, let him view the Son of God "making Himself of no reputation, taking upon Him the form of a servant humbling Himself, and becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Philip. ii.), and all for him,—that he a guilty sinner might have every obstacle to his complete reconciliation with God removed, and the gates of the kingdom opened wide for his admission; let him thus fixedly regard the Son of God, and see whether there is not a power in this truth to sway his wayward heart,—whether the view of "God in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself," is not a mighty inward help to man, in making the true choice.

But God has not stopped here: He has not rested satisfied with declaring His willingness to save, and providing for man a Saviour; had He done no more all might *have been* in vain. But He has done

more. God the Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son, has visited our earth, charged with a mission of love. He comes nigh to man; He stands beside him,—yea, He enters him and works a mighty work upon the very root of his being, enlightening the understanding, changing the heart, renewing the will, giving to the soul a new, a Divine nature, and thus empowering it to choose the Lord to be its God.

See here then how mighty is this help, for it is God Himself who, profoundly pitying your state of helplessness, gives Himself to you, that you may be enabled to give yourself to Him. It only remains for me to add, that the gift of the blessed Spirit is freely offered to all who will seek it. “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that

ask Him?" (Luke xi. 13.) "Let him that is athirst come: and whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." (Rev. xxii. 17.) Oh! my dear friends, rely upon *God* as the great inward help to you in coming to a right decision as to whom you will serve. Seek Him earnestly, if you would serve Him truly. Seek to know Him as one who is willing to save; seek to welcome the grace of the eternal Son; seek to share the blessed influences, and to enjoy the holy indwelling of the eternal Spirit; accept of the help which God offers you when He offers Himself, and your choice will be virtually made. You will have found in your own happy experience that "the things which are impossible with men, are possible with God."



IV.

The Choice: its Blessedness.

"Blessed is the man whom thou choosest."

PSALM lxxv. 4.

TRUE religion appears to many to be a sad and a gloomy thing. But it wears this aspect only to those who have never given it a trial; who have never followed the advice of the Psalmist: "Taste and see that the Lord is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in Him." (Ps. xxxiv. 8.)

Real happiness! True blessedness! In what does it consist? Clearly in this, and in this only: in the enjoyment of God's favour, and the doing of God's will. Men

ask sometimes, Where is there any happiness, and how can we secure it? and then, like Pilate when he asked the Saviour "What is truth?" they turn away without waiting for an answer. They are not in earnest in the inquiry; or they are afraid that the answer will not be to their liking; or they have made up their minds where *they* will seek their happiness: and so this deep, solemn, all-important question remains for them as if it had never been asked, for it was never meant to bring back an honest answer. I trust, however, that *you*, my brethren, are in earnest in this matter; that you feel religion to be a question of life and death; and that you are firmly purposed, by God's help, to give yourselves up heartily and unreservedly to the service of the Lord.

You must expect, as we have already seen, that in making this choice, you will *meet with difficulties* and hindrances: it

is no sunny summer's ramble, through meadows and woodlands, and beside gently flowing brooks, that you are invited to, but a stern and rugged mountain journey,—an arduous and toilsome passage, amid rocks and torrents and ice fields, needing a strong faith and a steady will. This I have warned you of: this you are perhaps learning for yourselves. The choice, however, once made, how great is its blessedness! I want you to believe this, even if you have not already found it out for yourselves: I want you to have this truth deeply rooted in your hearts—that without and apart from God there is no such thing as real blessedness; and that with God nothing but blessedness can ever be your lot. Let your convictions be once upon the side of this grand truth, let there be once a living faith in the reality of spiritual and unseen blessedness, and you will possess an inward power which shall prove a mighty help to

you, both in making and in abiding by the blessed choice.

“Blessed is the man whom Thou choosest.” “He that loves may be sure he was loved first ; and he that chooses God for his delight and portion, may conclude confidently that God hath chosen him to be one of those that shall enjoy Him, and be happy in Him for ever : for that our love and electing of Him is but the return and repercussion of the beams of His love shining upon us.” Such is Archbishop Leighton’s comment upon 1 Peter i. 2, and it explains our text.

“Blessed is the man whom Thou choosest.” Have *you*, dear friends, chosen God ? then may you feel assured that God has first chosen you ; that the blessedness which belongs to His chosen ones belongs to you, that “ye are thereunto called that ye should inherit a blessing.” (1 Pet. iii. 9.) *But wherein* does the blessedness of God’s

chosen ones consist? One of the simplest ways, perhaps, of viewing the subject, is to consider what they who make this choice *avoid*, and what they *gain*. *They avoid* a life of sin, a death without hope, and an eternity of misery. The decision which is not *for* God must be *against* God; there is no middle course: but *such* decision is in itself an act of disobedience, and implies that the heart is under the dominion of sin. And what must be the course of him who refuses to take the Lord to be his God? Surely a course of sin. Death comes and finds the man impenitent and unforgiven; perhaps hardened in his impenitence. Eternity opens to his view,—the blackness of darkness for ever, the worm that dieth not, and the fire that shall never be quenched. How awful! Is it not worth your while to *make* an effort to escape this fearful doom? See, then, how great is the evil which you *avoid* by choosing the Lord and His service.

But our subject is properly the *positive* blessedness which attaches to this choice.

(1) *In the first place, it implies a state of mind in those who make it, which God has everywhere pronounced to be blessed.*

There will be in them a deep consciousness of sin and unworthiness, a true humility and sense of spiritual poverty, and Christ hath said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for their's is the kingdom of heaven."

There will be real sorrow for sin and for the dishonour which has been cast upon God and His law: and Christ hath said, "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted."

There will be a desire meekly to receive, yea, an earnest longing after inward righteousness; and Christ hath said, "Blessed are the meek:" "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness."

There will be a delight in showing mercy

to those whose condition demands sympathy and support ; a desire to keep the conscience void of offence ; a constant effort to spread on all sides the peace of the Gospel : and when the good intended or achieved is evil spoken of, and love shown to others provokes only the enmity and opposition of the world, there will be the spirit of patient uncomplaining submission ; and Christ hath said, "Blessed are the merciful:" "Blessed are the pure in heart:" "Blessed are the peacemakers:" "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake."

There will be separation from an ungodly world and the refusal to have fellowship with the irreligious ; and the Psalmist hath said, "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful." (Ps. i. 1.)

There will be delight in God's Word.

and a life framed according to its directions ; and it is said again, " Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord." There will be a title to the blessing pronounced by the Psalmist : " Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound ; they shall walk, O Lord, in the light of Thy countenance ;" and to those blessings pronounced by Christ :— " Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed : " and again, " Come ye blessed of the Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Thus again and again is the state of mind which belongs to those who choose the Lord for their portion pronounced to be most blessed ; the inspired messengers of God in all ages, prophets and apostles, yea, the Son of God himself, all agree in ascribing to that state of mind, and to that alone, the possession of true blessedness.

(2) *But secondly, those who make the choice described have Jehovah as their covenant God.* The source and essence of their happiness consists in this, that they can say with truth, "This God is our God for ever and ever." (Ps. xlviii. 14.) They who choose God are, as we have seen, those whom God has Himself chosen; He "hath chosen them in Christ before the foundation of the world;" and hath covenanted with them that "He will be their God, and that they shall be His people." How close and how blessed is the relationship here described; carrying us back for its origin to the eternity which is past, and forwards for its perfected accomplishment to the eternity which is to come; whilst here it secures every blessing which the renewed heart can desire.

(3) *Let us, thirdly, consider some of these blessings in detail.* "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." (Eph. i. 3.) All spiritual blessings thus belong to the believer.

Forgiveness is his. In Christ "we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins." (Eph. i. 7.) The Christian has not only the assurance of final and complete acquittal; he has that, for he knows that he "shall not come into condemnation;" but he has more than that, he has a present forgiveness; believing in the Lord Jesus Christ he is a justified man; the Lord has said to him as He said to the penitent of old, "Thy sins are forgiven;" and he can enter into the experience of the Psalmist, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." (Psalm xxxii. 1.)

Holiness is his. The same Divine Spirit which has led him to Christ, has implanted within him a new nature; the moral image

of Christ is faintly, perhaps, at first, yet not less surely stamped upon his soul ; he is sanctified as well as justified, and purified as well as pardoned : the love of sin, no less than its guilt, is put away ; he is a new creature. Possessing the principle of righteousness, he hungers and thirsts after a larger measure of it, for he finds by experience, that to be truly holy is to be truly blessed.

Peace is his. "Being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Rom. v. 1.) No dread of punishment alarms him, for Christ has paid the penalty of his sin. No feeling of enmity towards God exists, for the breach is healed. In the enjoyment of complete reconciliation, and in the assurance of the Divine favour, "the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keeps his heart and mind through Christ Jesus."

Joy is his. Though at times sorrow

may be his portion, and he is "in heaviness through manifold temptations," yet "believing" he "rejoices with joy unspeakable and full of glory."

For *Hope* is his. Not always, perhaps, bright and strong ; but true and well-founded. A hope that "maketh not ashamed ;" a hope which sustains his spirit in adversity, and bears him triumphantly across the stormy sea of life to the haven where he would be.

"*All spiritual blessings*" are his : blessings make up the daily bread of his life. All things work together for his good, and every gift and every mercy comes to him along the channel of covenant love.

(4) *I may say, then, lastly, of this blessedness, that it is EVER PRESENT, SATISFYING, INCORRUPTIBLE.*

It is *ever present*. It is not, like the objects of earthly pursuit, oftentimes beyond our reach, and, often as we think to



seize them, slipping suddenly from our grasp. The Christian's God is a present God : the blessedness enjoyed is a present blessedness. Trial and temptation may be very near to him ; sorrow, and grief, and anxiety may be very near to him ; yea, Satan may be very near to him ; but God in Christ is nearer still. He is ever ready, ever present, to bless, to succour, and to save.

It is *satisfying*. The pleasures of sin, and the amusements and rewards of the world may excite and gratify for a season, but they cannot satisfy the heart. "Who-soever drinketh of *this* water shall thirst again." Most truly may this be said of every object which is sought for independently of God. "But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him," saith our Lord, "shall never thirst." Christ gives Himself as the food of man's soul : He is the bread, and His Spirit is the

water of life. "Our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ, and the invitation addressed to us is, "Eat O friends: drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved."

It is *incorruptible*. The treasures of earth decay and fade away; "moth and rust doth corrupt, and thieves break through and steal." Instability and death are written in legible characters upon all below. The Christian's portion changes not; here his blessings expand and multiply with time and use; however he may himself share in the general decay, his blessedness knows nothing of the moth and the rust, no thief breaks through and robs him of his treasure: and when earth shall have passed from his view, there shall rise before him "an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away."

Such, in very brief outline, is the blessedness of the Christian's choice. What a

beautiful prospect is thus opened out to us! Can you doubt any longer for whom and for what you will live. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem," said the loving Saviour, "how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" "I would" . . . "Ye would not."

What a contrast is there here! What a depth of meaning in this conflict of wills. "I would." The desire of Jesus is towards you; He offers to gather you to Himself; He asks you to be willing to be blessed of Him. "And ye would not." Nay, rather say from the very bottom of your heart, "Lord, I believe: help Thou mine unbelief."

V.

The Choice: its Witnesses.

“And Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you the Lord, to serve Him. And they said, We are witnesses.”—JOSH. xxiv. 22.

CONFIRMATION is, as we have already seen, a far more serious and solemn thing than many persons seem to suppose. There are some who desire to be confirmed merely because their parents and their friends wish it, but without feeling for themselves any deep sense of the responsibility and importance of the step which they propose

to take. There are others, again, who think that their having arrived at a certain age gives them a right to Confirmation ; that other young persons are preparing for it, and that it would be a marked thing in them to refrain from seeking it ; but they have never seriously considered what it involves ; they have never regarded it as pledging them to a life totally different from that which the majority of men are living ; and they have no intention of striving to lead that unworldly life. It is to be feared that with many this sacred rite means little more than a conforming to what is the universal custom ; an act of obedience to an appointment of the Church to which they belong ; a sort of conclusion to their education, by which they are introduced into communion, not so much with God's spiritual Church, as with that world which all true Christians are called upon to come out from and avoid.

It has been my object in these lectures, and in my private interviews with you, to explain to you what Confirmation really means ; that whilst all deference is due to the wish of our relations, and submission to a long-established rite is most proper, far more than this is involved in Confirmation ; that it implies the full purpose of renouncing the world, and dedicating the life to God ; that it involves, if rightly received, the conversion of the heart, the free and decided choice of the Lord and His service,—a life, in fact, of practical piety, of daily self-denial, and of constant progress in spiritual holiness. To this, and nothing short of this, you pledge yourselves in Confirmation. And this is substantially what I have taught you. I have dwelt upon the *nature* of the choice which you profess to make, its *hindrances*, its *helps*, its *blessedness*. Lastly, I propose to consider who are its *witnesses*.



It adds very much to the solemnity of the *promise* which you make in Confirmation, that it is an act which once performed can never be revoked. This is true, indeed, of every moral act of God's rational creatures ; it is part of the burden which as immortal beings we all bear, that every moral action has upon it the stamp of immortality. That is, we can never be as though that action had not been performed. If it has been for good, the beneficial influence shall never cease to be felt ; if it has been for evil, the evil result shall stretch onwards into eternity. And specially is this true of a transaction which is carried on directly between the soul and its God, which involves the whole question of our service and our life, and which is celebrated after due and serious consideration, beneath the highest sanctions of religion, and publicly in the sight of God and man.

To such a transaction there must needs be witnesses : witnesses who attest its performance, and who shall hereafter note either the breach or the fulfilment of the promise thus made. And who are these witnesses ?

(1) GOD is a witness.

“There is not a word in my tongue, but lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether.” (Psalm cxxxix. 4.) Most true is this of that solemn word, “I do,” to be uttered by each one of you in Confirmation. “Do you here in the presence of God . . . renew the solemn promise and vow that was made in your name at your baptism?” is the question asked of you. Your answer is, “I do.” That word, then, is uttered in God’s special presence ; He hears it ; He notes it ; although invisible to the eye of sense, He is truly present to the eye of faith ; a witness to the promise made ; a most true and faithful witness. There is

something almost awful in this fact ; and were our conceptions of it as vivid as they ought to be, we should be well nigh overwhelmed with a sense of the responsibility which rests upon us. At all events, let the knowledge that God is a witness tend to awe and solemnize your minds, and drive away all light, trifling, and worldly thoughts at this most important season of your lives ; let it stir you up to increased prayer and watchfulness ; let it prompt you to seek more and more earnestly for that grace, without which the promise which you make can only end in failure and shame.

(2) MAN is a witness.

Religion is not only a question between God and man's own heart, the practice of which is to be confined to the secret chamber : it is to be avowed and practised before the world : "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness ; and

with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." (Romans x. 10.) And our Lord has said, "Whosoever, therefore, shall confess Me before men, him will I confess also before my Father in heaven." (Matt. x. 32.) The duty of making a public profession of our faith in Christ is thus taught; and this profession is in a marked manner made by you in Confirmation. You renew your baptismal vow "in the presence of the congregation," no less than "in the presence of God." The congregation thus witnesses your act. *Parents* perhaps, who have watched over you most anxiously, and have made it the subject of many prayers that you might make an early decision on the side of God and vital religion; *brothers and sisters* perhaps, who have "chosen the good part" already, and long that those they love may make the same happy choice; *pastors*, who desire this one thing for you, that you may



become the devoted followers of the Lord Jesus Christ: these are among the witnesses, the human witnesses of your act. How happy shall it be for them and for you, if they shall be able to look back upon this season with thankfulness, as one in which you were indeed confirmed in your choice of God; how sad, if a promise falsely made is followed by a life of worldliness and sin, and an act, which might have been so blessed, only rises up in condemnation against you.

But more than this. Others there are who witness the transaction,—witnesses most intimately acquainted with all its circumstances, and whose testimony you cannot dispute.

(3) YE ARE WITNESSES AGAINST YOURSELVES. When Joshua, after solemnly cautioning the children of Israel with reference to the holy and jealous character of their God, and the strict and uncon-

ditional nature of the service which He required, had received from them the repeated expression of their firm determination to serve Him, "The people said unto Joshua, Nay, but we will serve the Lord;" (verse 21), he reminded them that they were themselves the witnesses to this solemn statement, witnesses against themselves, if they should hereafter depart from their vow of allegiance: "And Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you the Lord, to serve Him. And they said, We are witnesses." These words apply directly to you. You are competent witnesses to an act which is your own,—to the renewal, the intelligent and voluntary renewal, of your baptismal vow. It is not in ignorance that you make the promise; you understand its nature, the obligations which belong to it, the life to which it *pledges* you. You are witnesses, there-

fore, who can well speak to the fact, that you professedly "choose the Lord to serve Him," and you are witnesses either for or against yourselves in all time to come, according to your adherence to or departure from the choice thus solemnly made.

It is evident that after Confirmation two courses are open to you, two lives are before you, either of which may be led :— a life for God, or a life for the world. I do not suppose that you feel *now* any other desire but that your future life may be spent for God. It is possible, however, that you may be deceived.

Let us suppose such a case. You come to Confirmation *thoughtlessly*, without having given to the subject any deep and earnest attention ; taking it as it comes, without reflecting upon the responsibility which is involved in it ; or you come *presumptuously*, depending upon your own strength of will and constancy of purpose.

never having realized the greatness of the difficulties which stand in your way, the power of sin, and the strength of temptation, and not knowing your own utter weakness and your constant proneness to fall ; or you come *in a worldly spirit*, with your heart still cleaving to the things of earth,—its pleasures, its amusements, its wealth, its honours, its applause ; or you come *in an undecided spirit*, feeling the necessity of choosing the Lord, but wavering and halting between two opinions, and coming to no distinct decision as to whom you will serve. Now if it is in any such spirit that you make your Confirmation promise, what think you is likely to be the character of your future life ? The abuse of holy things can lead to nothing but evil. The sense of the solemnity of the act, if any rest upon your mind, will soon pass away ; the word lightly spoken will *be as lightly* forgotten, the world and the

flesh will re-assert their dominion, and you will settle down into a life of worldliness, perhaps, of open sin ; possessing, it may be, the form of godliness, but totally ignorant of its power. If this be the case with any of you, there will be no need of other witnesses to bear testimony against you ; ye yourselves will be witnesses against yourselves, both to the fact that you solemnly pledged yourselves to serve the Lord, and also to your grievous departure from the pledge which you had given. Your memory shall speak to the fact that the promise was made ; your conscience shall testify against you that that promise has been broken : your heart shall condemn you. Perhaps from time to time in this life you will utter this sad testimony against yourselves : the sick bed, the day of sorrow, some one of the many voices of God's providence, shall startle you from your false security, and remind

you of the past : and if not in life, then when death, and certainly when judgment shall have come, you will no longer be able to silence the testimony of your hearts. Ye shall be witnesses against yourselves, that ye publicly professed to choose the Lord, and then departed from Him.

Be warned, then, of your danger. If you are approaching Confirmation in a thoughtless, a presumptuous, a worldly, or an undecided spirit ; beware of a fatal issue to an action which, if rightly undertaken, shall prove a source to you of many blessings. It were better for you, bad as that would be, to stay away altogether, than to approach the holy rite with an unprepared heart, to make the promise to God only to deny it in after life : " Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay." (Eccl. v. 5.)

But let us suppose the case to be far *different* with you from that which I have

described. You have given deep and oft-repeated thought to the subject, and you feel its solemn responsibility: you are conscious, painfully conscious, of your own sinfulness and weakness; you are humbled under a sense of your unworthiness; your earnest desire is to renounce the world, and to make a firm and lasting decision for God; you approach, you make, you follow up the Confirmation promise *with earnest prayer*. Do this, and you need not fear the result. You shall find God meeting you at all points with His grace, and strengthening you with strength in your soul. Never for one moment shall you regret your choice of Him; never shall your heart bear witness against the wisdom and the blessedness of *that* step. Whilst with increasing attachment to the person of the Saviour, and a growing conformity to His image and His will, you shall often recur with feelings of grati-

tude to the period which fixed your choice : when giving earnest heed to the command, "Choose you this day whom ye will serve," you learned to say humbly, but yet heartily and firmly, "We will serve the Lord."

"And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified." (Acts xx. 32.)

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